

Chun

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South Korea enters the countdown to the 1988 Seoul Olympics with signs of growing internal stresses and strains. President Chun, who has promised to step down in 1988, remains fully in charge, but increasingly finds himself caught between the pressures for political reform from a small but vocal legislative opposition and demands to keep the lid on by influential hardliners, particularly within the military. Student demonstrations and other disruptions planned for this fall appear genuinely to frighten him, probably because similar activities were a major factor in the fall of two previous Korean regimes. But if he follows his instincts and uses heavy-handed tactics against his critics, he may well run afoul of the U.S., which has already begun to consider options designed to moderate Chun's rule.

U.S. policymakers give President Chun overall high marks for his handling of the pressures surrounding the return of Kim Dae Jung and the 1985 elections. Although Kim's airport reception left much to be desired, Chun acted with remarkable restraint during the weeks before and after the opposition leader's arrival and the election itself was free of blatant irregularities. Subsequently, his actions, however, indicate a move away from moderation and towards a more hardline approach. Recent key appointments favored those advocating a tougher stance and few moderates are consulted by the Blue House on important matters. The controversial draft campus stabilization law--including "reeducation centers" for radical students--favored by the President is indicative of his present state of mind.

Some Department of State officials already advocate that the U.S. intervene to pressure Chun to moderate current policies. They believe Chun is orchestrating anti-regime demonstrations at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul to build a case for a crackdown on dissidents, especially campus radicals. Such acts, they believe, could result in widespread protests and increased instability. They recommend that it's time to get tough with Chun.

Most officials, however, continue to believe that such a strategy would undermine Chun and create the very conditions the U.S. seeks to avoid. They accept that heavy-handed tactics could bring Chun down before 1988, but argue that the military also poses a threat. Since U.S. policy envisions an orderly transition of power in 1988, their objective is to maintain stability until then. Consequently, they advocate being supportive of Chun publicly to include favored treatment in terms of a meeting with the President this fall, but privately pressuring Chun to remove the most repressive elements of his program such as locking up radical students in "reeducation centers".

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Chun retains the support of the military even though he is generally disliked by many of its key leaders. Vocal dissatisfaction that surfaced shortly after Kim Dae Jung's return among key generals seems to have dissipated with the advent of Chun's new tougher posture, and probably in part explains the President's harsher attitude. As long as Chun effectively manages the anticipated student unrest on the campuses this fall, overt opposition from within the military is unlikely to be a problem. But should Chun attempt to go back on his word to step down in 1988, his support from the military could vanish, increasing the prospects for a coup dramatically.

Chun's true intentions in this regard are not clear. U.S. access to him has dwindled over the years to the point where contacts are infrequent and most often unproductive. Presumably, the President recognizes the limits of his mandate from the military and his unpopularity among Korean voters. But his efforts to score a diplomatic spectacular before 1988 by arranging a summit meeting with the North Korean strongman, Kim Il-sung, suggests he may still harbor hopes of finding a way to perpetuate his rule beyond the Olympics. Any attempt to stay on would almost certainly precipitate a crisis.

Keeping the generals and other hardliners happy until 1988, of course, increases the prospects for political and social turmoil. Many Koreans view Chun's rule as illegitimate because of the way he seized power and his handling of the Kwangju incident. Most remain quiescent for now, however, having given priority to the traditional values of stability and the requirements of national security. But excessive force against campus demonstrators this fall or other acts of repression against opposition leaders could trigger wider protests. If, on the other hand, he is too lenient or shows signs of giving in to opposition demands for a greater political role, he risks angering the military. In short, Chun must manage each potential crisis deftly by walking a tightrope in order to retain his "mandate of heaven".